

Questions and Answers about Chemical Terrorism

Q What is chemical terrorism?

A Chemical terrorism is the use of chemicals, like mustard gas, sarin, or phosgene, as weapons to harm people to meet terrorist goals. Although there are many agreements that ban the development, production and stockpiling of chemical weapons, several countries refuse to comply. Chemical terrorism has never occurred in the United States.

Q What are the types of chemicals most likely to be used?

A There are three main groups of chemical weapons used in terrorism.

1. Chemicals that affect Nerves – Sarin, Tabun, Soman, and VX
2. Chemicals that affect Skin – Mustard and Lewsite
3. Chemicals that affect Lungs – Phosgene, Cyanide, and Chlorine

These chemicals are usually released as either a liquid spray or vapor.

Q What are the symptoms of chemical exposure?

A The symptoms of chemical exposure may happen right away or later, depending on the type of chemical and the amount.

- Possible symptoms of chemicals that affect Nerves – Blurred vision, runny nose, chest tightness, nausea, vomiting and convulsions.
- Possible symptoms of chemicals that affect Skin – Reddened skin, difficulty breathing, coughing, sinus pain, or sore throat, small blisters that appear and combine to form large blisters.
- Possible symptoms of chemicals that affect Lungs – Irritation to the eyes, nose and skin. A large exposure may cause loss of consciousness within seconds.

Q Do I need a gas mask?

A No. Gas masks only work against chemical weapons if worn at the time of release. They must be tested for a good fit to work. Using gas masks the wrong way can cause serious injury or even death, especially for people with heart or lung disease.

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The Los Angeles County Department of Health Services strongly recommends against the use of gas masks.

Q How can I protect myself for a chemical attack?

A The LAC DHS is prepared to respond to public health emergencies, including possible chemical attack. If there is a real threat, the LAC DHS will contact the news to give you information on how to protect yourself and your family. Make sure that you have a battery-powered radio and a list of important telephone numbers, especially your doctor's number just like you would for any emergency.

Q Where can I find more information about chemical terrorism?

A More information about chemical or biological terrorism agents is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at www.bt.cdc.gov under the Frequently Asked Questions section.

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Your local Public Health Center is:

